Visually Impaired Professional Personnel

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Contents

Foreword	1
Introduction	3
Recruitment	5
The Hiring Process	7
On The Job	13
Retaining A Productive Employee	18
The AFB	20
AFB Regional Offices	20
AFB Publications	21
Sources of Sensory Aids	22

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FOREWORD

A few years ago, AFB conducted a year-long study* to identify the strategies blind and visually impaired scientists and professionals used to overcome barriers to career development. The study results indicated that the barriers encountered were largely social in nature. Nevertheless, results also showed that many of the scientists and professionals who participated in the study had managed to transcend the barriers, and were often able to identify the specific nature of the obstacles they met.

Visually Impaired Professional Personnel grew out of that study and out of AFB staff's many years of experience dealing with employment of visually impaired persons. While it discusses some of the social circumstances that inhibit the career development of visually impaired professionals and managers, the primary emphasis is on practical ways in which the employer can eliminate these social barriers before they occur.

Because both research and experience reveals that these barriers can occur at any stage of the employment process, this pamphlet discusses all phases of employment from recruitment through promotion. While it deals specifically with persons in professional, managerial and technical fields, broadly defined, it also draws upon experience with employment of visually impaired professionals in other areas of business.

Visually Impaired Professional Personnel is directed to employers, from the corporate president who sets policies, to the college recruiter and including personnel department staff who conduct preliminary job interviews, and line supervisors and employment managers. The aim is to help these people overcome barriers by identifying them and suggesting how they can be eliminated.

While reading does the trick for many people, the human interaction of "talking/consulting/reflecting" is often the most powerful agent of change. Thus this pamphlet comes to you with an invitation to get in touch with the American Foundation for the Blind which can provide you with technical assistance.

Henry B. Stern

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*1978, National Science Foundation

Who Are the Blind?

Severe visual impairment may be called "blindness," "functional blindness," or defined as the inability to read newspaper print, or "legal blindness," a classification used to determine eligibility for various public benefits. A person is said to be "legally blind" if his or her central visual acuity does not exceed 20/200 in the better eye with the best correcting lenses or his or her visual field is less than an angle of 20 degrees. In simpler terms, a person is considered "legally blind" if he can see no more at a distance of 20 feet than someone with normal sight can see at a distance of 200 feet.

There are many definitions of blindness, all referring to how well the individual can see even with corrective lenses. Actually, most so-called "blind" persons—over 75 percent in this country—do have some usable vision.

The American Foundation for the Blind suggests that the term "blindness" be reserved for complete loss of sight, with all other degrees of visual loss considered as visual impairment. Therefore, anyone whose loss of vision affects his or her normal functioning and performance would be eligible for materials, services, and training.

The person who was born blind is said to be congenitally blind, while the formerly sighted individual who has become blind through disease or accident is adventitiously blinded. Visual impairment can mean that overall sight is affected, that only the edges or a part of the visual field is obscured, or that there is no central vision although side or peripheral vision still exists.

According to the 1977 survey by the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), approximately 1.4 million Americans are severely visually impaired, that is, unable to read ordinary newsprint even with glasses. It is estimated that about half a million people in the U.S. are registered as legally blind. Many others could probably qualify as legally blind but do not register for various reasons.

Of the 1.4 million severely visually impaired Americans reported by the 1977 NCHS study, approximately 37,000 were preschool or school age children (birth to 17 years) and about 364,000 were in the usual working age category (18-64 years). Only 32 percent or 117,000 considered themselves to be in the labor force and the majority of these, 106,000 were employed.

In the younger age groups, through age 64, the severely visually impaired are about equally distributed between men and women; among people 65 or older, the severely visually impaired population is predominantly female.

INTRODUCTION

Why a pamphlet about employment of visually impaired professional, managerial and technical personnel? Understandably, companies take a macro-system approach when they look at the employment of disabled persons. After all, in absolute terms persons with disabilities represent 30 to 35 million people, of whom only approximately 115,000 visually impaired persons are in the labor market or employed at any one time. While the macro-system approach makes sense, it may foster a tendency to view disability as monolithic, to assume that the problems of all persons with disabilities are similiar and that the strategies for bringing them into the mainstream of the working world are similar too.

One group among the disabled population that, inadvertently, may be slighted by the macro-system approach is the blind. As you can see from the chart, "Who Are the Blind?", (see box), there are not very many people in this country who are totally blind or severely visually impaired and of the total number very few are of working age and in the labor market.

Because there are so few totally blind and severely visually impaired persons in this country, it is possible, perhaps probable that many of the readers of this pamphlet have never met a blind person much less worked or gone to school with one. Your images of blind persons may be derived from the seers of classic myth, drawings of mendicants in the middle ages, the "superblind" men of TV movies.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to replace these traditional images of blind persons at "work" with new ones. Let us visualize instead

—A high level broadcasting industry executive with low vision whose only adaptations are a secretary for reading and a video magnifier for studying statistical reports.

—A totally blind mathematician who uses an abacus for simple calculations and a "talking" calculator for more complex ones and a tactile reading machine for journal articles.

—A partially sighted industrial psychologist who scores tests with the use of spectacle-mounted low vision aids.

—A marketing manager with low vision who uses a CRT computer terminal equipped with a transitory braille display rather than a video screen to get up-to-the-minute information on sales and inventory.

—A totally blind management trainer, a specialist in teaching oral communication to executives, who uses a cassette recorder to write her curriculum and puts her daily lesson plans in braille so that she can refer to them in class.

—A totally blind quality control engineer who does her job with a braille micrometer and a "talking" vernier caliper.

—An internal communications editor with low vision who uses a large print typewriter to write stories and a video magnifier to review manuscripts and galleys.

—A totally blind radio announcer who has hooked up a braille computer to the news service wires to get braille output and uses a braille stop watch to time broadcasts.

—A partially sighted statistician who uses a video magnifier to read the computer printouts of the data for the studies he's involved with.

—A totally blind technical writer who uses a talking electric typewriter to compose manuals.

—A totally blind engineer, using a "talking computer" who does R&D work on management information systems.

—Another engineer, blind since birth, who writes software for testing aircraft electronics systems. Like many sighted persons, he uses a cassette to dictate but he also uses it to write, and makes personal notes on a brailler.

—A totally blind corporate attorney who has access to a service which provides her with braille copies of new court rulings and government regulations pertinent to her work.

—A totally blind lobbyist and legislative analyst who uses readers to keep up-to-date on legislation and regulations and a cassette recorder to develop the testimony he is frequently called upon to give before legislatures and regulatory bodies.

—A management information systems designer who performs her job with the assistance of a braille computer terminal, and gets her professional reading done via cassette.

The nice thing about revising your image of blind and visually impaired people at work is that the new image is real. Unlike the mythic seer and the TV Superman, the quality control technician, the broadcast executive, the engineers, the statistician, the radio announcer, the mathematician, the recruiter, the management information systems designer, the technical writer, the industrial psychologist and the marketing manager

are real people, living and working in the United States today. And there are many more qualified visually impaired people like them. In any given year, 10,000 blind and severely visually impaired individuals are enrolled in undergraduate and graduate school and a considerable number of them, encouraged by the availability of technological adaptations, are opting out of the traditional blind occupations and into modern business and industry-related fields. But this is not the only pool of skilled visually impaired people. Each year, a number of skilled people with considerable experience lose their sight. They should be encouraged to retain their jobs and learn to use adaptations; unfortunately, too few are.

Some of the real blind people described earlier were part of a group of scientists who participated in the 1978 AFB study by the National Science Foundation (NSF). Others described are knows to AFB staff concerned with manpower services.

The purpose of the NSF study was to identify barriers to employment by looking at the education and work histories of a substantial number of highly trained and skilled visually impaired persons.

At the time of the NSF study, the majority of the participants were employed in their chosen fields but most reported difficulties with getting jobs that had nothing to do with their abilities or qualifications.

The same difficulties were mentioned in interview after interview; underemployment; assigned to jobs outside chosen field; placed into an occupational ghetto such as computer programming; inability of employers to accept non-traditional ways of doing specific tasks; ignorance of fact that the visually impaired person has effective and sophisticated means of compensating for lack of vision.

Fortunately, the study results revealed more than problems; it also pointed the way to solutions, the most important of which led to the writing of this pamphlet.

The employer must influence the informal recruitment system so that it will screen in, rather than screen out, qualified persons with disabilities.

RECRUITMENT

How does finding a job really work in our society?

Little research on the recruitment process for particular jobs has been done but one study reported that about 60 percent of those interviewed found their present jobs through personal contacts, that is, informal channels; while formal channels such as newspaper advertisements aided about 20 percent in finding jobs. The remaining 20 percent found work as a result of unsolicited applications to a company.

The study also revealed that both employees and employers preferred informal methods. AFB's contacts with university faculty, industrial research supervisors and personnel staff, also reveal substantial reliance on informal channels for recruiting professional, technical and administrative personnel. Heavy reliance on informal recruiting methods has crucial implications for visually impaired and blind people.

An organization that seriously seeks to employ blind persons and others with disabilities must start carefully considering this informal system. It is universal, seems effective, and, in any case, is unlikely to go away.

Implementing a policy that "published job advertisements should specifically encourage persons with disabilities to apply" is fine as far as it goes. But, if most positions are filled through informal channels, efforts must be made to counteract the limiting effects of this method. The employer must influence the informal recruitment system so that it *screens in*, rather than *screens out*, qualified persons with disabilities.

Informal Recruitment Networks

Many of us have networks of personal connections, "linkages" to social and business contacts which provide job-related information. Most visually impaired persons have restricted networks. Many of them did not go to local schools or use general recreational facilities when younger and could not afford time for extracurricular activities during their university years. They often do not form relationships which later become informal job and career networks. The employer must assume that blind and visually impaired applicants depend more on formal channels and "pure chance" to learn about jobs and get little unsolicited job information.

Another difficulty which use of informal channels poses is reluctance to give job information to a visually impaired colleague. Colleagues may be reticent to pass on information or to "put in a good word" because of the negative reaction they anticipate from the prospective employer. Even though direct experience with a blind professional or manager has disproven negative notions, colleagues' knowledge or assumptions about others' beliefs about the capabilities of visually impaired persons could prevent them from providing job-finding assistance. Colleagues may feel that the expected rewards—recruiter's bonus, favorable standing with superiors, or reciprocated job assistance—will not be forthcoming.

One solution lies on disseminating the "new" attitude widely to universities, professional societies, company management and employee groups that referrals of persons who are visually impaired or have other disabilities is encouraged. The printed word helps, but personal contact is more effective. For instance, a brief comment by a corporate college relations specialist to an engineering department chairman who serves as regional president of a professional society.

Many persons with disabilities have strong drives for independence. While this is understandable, indeed commendable, it can have a negative effect since the disabled persons may associate use of available network and "linkage" connections with dependence. Some very competent and successful visually impaired professionals consider employment not obtained on their own as tainted. Most people, disabled or not, do not seem to realize how important informal channels are in the development of careers. A primary reason for the runaway success of that modern career guidance classic, *What Color Is Your Parachute?* is its concentration on the importance of networks.

Ironically, the drive for independence which has brought many disabled persons up to and beyond the thresholds of employment, may hinder full career development by limiting or shutting off the most important avenue to many professional positions.

Despite these problems, there are many ways an employer can find qualified visually impaired applicants:

A. Develop very specific formal channels of recruitment:
   1. lists of local, regional and national organizations of visually impaired persons.

2. lists of publications which serve blind and visually impaired persons, particularly professional groups of such persons.
3. lists of coalition groups of disabled persons. Help them become acquainted with your company.
4. lists of occupational interest groups and professional societies. Send annual reports, AA statements, and job or trainee openings to these groups.

(The American Foundation for the Blind can provide employers with lists or assistance in developing them.)

5. Contact these groups about the possibility of sending a staff member to their meetings. Whether or not your company is recruiting at the time, sending a representative (perhaps as a speaker) can create linkages that may be fruitful in the future.

B. Formal channels should maximize recruitment of qualified disabled persons:
1. All job announcements and campus newspaper advertisements should state that your company is an Affirmative Action and Equal Opportunity employer and that persons with disabilities are encouraged to apply.
2. Make sure that college recruiters and employment managers know of your policy and intent. This applies as well to executive search firms.
3. In pre-visit contacts with campus recruiters and college relations staff make explicit your policy and intent to college placement officers, to key faculty who recommend students and graduates, to student professional societies, to organizations of disabled students on campus.
4. Notify all executive search firms the company uses that you wish to consider visually impaired persons.
5. Record recruitment pamphlets on cassette and make them available to college placement offices for use by visually impaired students.
6. Be cautious about linkages to rehabilitation agencies that serve visually impaired persons.

Despite innovative approaches, some rehabilitation agencies have often emphasized employment for persons below the professional, managerial and technical levels. Visually impaired persons with professional, managerial and technical potential may be reached through campus and school contacts. However, some rehabilitation agencies do have "Career Development Units" which specialize in serving the employment needs of large companies. These units work with a wide range of visually impaired persons and in many occupational fields. Committed employers use *all* systems and constantly adjust recruitment efforts depending on what proves effective.

For information on the visual impairment itself, direct discussion with the applicant is the best approach.

THE HIRING PROCESS

Broadly defined, the hiring process covers all negotiations between applicant and employer up to the first day of work. The core of the process for professionals is the interview between the candidate and a superior in the department where he or she would be working.

The Basic Principle in Hiring

Every company manager must make sure that a visually impaired applicant is not required to submit to any more or less rigorous procedures and standards than any other applicant for the same position. Few employers have had direct experience with any blind person or, experience limited to those in unskilled jobs. In any highly specialized field, the visually impaired job seeker is likely to be one of a few "pioneers," if not the first. The employer and the applicant may *both* be pioneers!

The visually impaired applicant is in the best position to help resolve uncertainties about lack of vision that arise during the interview since he or she has dealt with the demands of professional training for the position, and may have already done related work. In that sense, the visually impaired person has a certain advantage in the interview, and without being pushy, should indicate the job-relatedness of his or her skills.

In most hiring situations, though, the employer has the edge, especially when the applicant is a beginner. Therefore, to ensure that all steps in the hiring process contribute to matching the qualifications of an applicant with the requirements of a specific job, the employer should use his or her power to draw out all the skills and experience the applicant can offer.

The Interview

You, the employer, have scheduled a personal interview with a candidate on the basis of desirable educational credentials and, possibly, work experience. This you learned from a resume the person submitted and, perhaps, through a personal recommendation from professors or colleagues. The candidate may have come to your attention through a campus recruiter or, perhaps, she answered an advertisement.

Let us assume that you are highly impressed by her credentials. Not uncommon for jobs at the level you are trying to fill, you have arranged for her to fly from her home in another state to spend two days at your firm. You will interview her first, later your superior will. She will also meet potential colleagues and see something of the community to which she might move.

Upon first meeting, you discover that the applicant is blind. You are taken aback. Initially you may doubt that she can do the job, in spite of her obvious qualifications.

Visually impaired persons differ among themselves on the issue of whether to provide information about their disability on their resume or letter of application. Some prefer to do so because they fear an employer would be shocked or angry at the last-minute discovery, and hastily terminate the interview. Or, on a more positive note, they feel there would be more time for the employer to plan a constructive interview. But others (backed by law and logic) feel they should not do so since their qualifications speak for them.

Conducting the Interview

Consider a science-related or technical opening. The main concern should be the nature and extent of the applicant's expertise and experience, including experimental creativity, understanding of the state-of-the-art, ability to organize resources to get the job done, and so on. But, naturally, you *are* concerned about the effects a severe visual impairment might have on getting the job done.

How can you get information about visual impairment's relationship to job performance without asking questions that might be discriminatory and illegal? This will not be a problem, as long as questions are clearly *task oriented.* Indeed, the vision problem *should* be discussed in the interview.

Many professionals say that they bring up their visual impairment if the interviewer does not, because it is important to deal with doubts to show that the subject of blindness can be discussed comfortably.

The interviewer should follow some rules of thumb: The visual problem should not be

discussed first nor dominate the interview. When blindness does become dominant the result is usually an inadequate assessment of the person's capabilities in relation to the job.

There are appropriate and inappropriate lines of questioning. Questions about basic areas of functioning with little or no vision even though they extend to the job situation, are inappropriate. The employer should assume that the individual who has gotten through advanced training and to the employment interview, can handle written material, write and get around.

Certainly, ask questions about methods the job candidate uses to do a particular job. For example, ask a benefits administrator, "Will you need a reader?" Or fire protection engineer, "Does your reading method require special space?" Later on in this handbook we discuss accommodations and adaptations on the job in more detail.

In brief, the rules of thumb are:

1. Ask first about know-how, experience and research skills!
2. Vision is okay to discuss, but not at first.
3. Vision should not dominate the interview.
4. Ask job-related questions regarding vision.

The focus of the interview with a visually impaired applicant as with a sighted person, should be on the person's professional, managerial or technical skills and experience. Only after a substantive discussion should questions about the impact of the disability on the performance of certain aspects of the job be raised.

Zero in on technical aspects of job

Ask applicant about solutions to job-task problems.

Discuss confidentiality problems and how to solve them if applicant uses cassettes for work materials.

The interviewer should not be timid. For example, ask a computer programmer or attorney about technical aspects of job performance if you do not understand how they would be done. Most visually impaired persons are prepared to provide answers. Through experience in their formal education, internship or apprentice assignments, visually impaired candidates will be able to describe solutions to potential obstacles that the employer is thinking about, perhaps for the first time.

Of course not everything fits past experience. Particular tasks or conditions of accomplishing them exist in a specific work setting in a given company. For example, confidentiality and security requirements for certain documents and specific projects may preclude using a reader without security clearance.

Assuming that the interview has re-inforced the initial impression that the applicant has the skills and general qualifications for the job, he or she would be encouraged to come in again with solutions for any problematic tasks (or to follow-up by phone or in writing). The American Foundation for the Blind and other agencies can often give technical assistance in this area.

Is the Query Job-Related?

What about job-related questions that are not relevant to a particular job or relate only peripherally? Many visually impaired job applicants report extensive questioning about long-distance travel when the job does not require it. Focus only on important areas of job functioning, and treat the relatively unimportant the same way you do with sighted applicants.

If frequent out-of-town travel is required in a job, that should be noted in the job announcement, since many persons, disabled or not, are not interested in such jobs. Assume that a visually impaired applicant for a job with heavy travel comes prepared to deal with it.

Indeed, we know of many blind persons in sales, marketing and consultative work, who each travel independently upwards of 100,000 miles a year. Questions about travel, when travel is nonessential, can be a facade for unexpressed underlying concerns. It is regrettable when these "grey areas" take time from discussions of what is relevant.

Sometimes, travel is not essential to a job, but makes the difference between stagnation or advancement. It clearly would be prejudicial not to provide information about this and other conditions for advancement.

Most jobs are heavily encrusted with traditional ways of doing things, traditions rarely questioned until people who are "different" apply. The efforts of women and minorities to be considered for the full-range of jobs has made many employers more aware of "non-ability" criteria often used to select staff for positions that supposedly rest on technical ability. The growing number of eligible applicants with different impairments calls for additional rethinking. Such rethinking has already resulted in variations in the way tasks get done in American business and industry.

Adaptations and Accommodations

If appropriate questioning reveals that a visual

impairment could affect performance of certain tasks, "reasonable accommodations" must be discussed.

There are three parts to the issue of adaptations and accommodations:

1. *Accommodation: The Personal Element*
   Adapted methods and equipment which the visually impaired person has worked out in the past and would bring along to this position. These generally apply to the basic tasks of reading, writing, and travel.
2. *What is Specific to the Job?*
   Adapted work methods specific to the job. Again, the main issue is the employer's willingness to accept adaptation and non-routine ways. Here the employer may need to participate actively in thinking through adpatations.
3. *Consider New Technology*
   New equipment, or adaptations to existing equipment. The main difference between this point and the previous one is the possible cost factor. See page 16.

When the employer has a clear picture of any job requirements which differ from tasks already known to the applicant, it is often the applicant who is best able to determine needed accommodations and whether he or she can provide them.

Resumes or Written Applications

For the job candidate who is recruited through informal channels, and may have already had an interview, submission of a resume and/or application is a formality, required for personnel department records. For persons who respond to formal recruitment channels, these documents are more important. However, we do want to point out that application forms should not request information about current or past physical impairments. Nor, obviously, should an interviewer ask for such information after meeting the candidate.

Occasionally, a candidate is given forms to fill

Focus only on the important areas of job functioning, and treat the relatively unimportant the same way as you do with sighted applicants.

out during the interview. In general, the blind candidate should be able to take the forms home to fill out; otherwise, the interviewer, a clerk, or receptionist could serve as reader. Many persons with some useful vision fill out the forms with the help of their own low vision aids.

The Personnel Department Interview

When the personnel unit is the point of initial contact with the blind candidate, the unit can, if given more of a mandate than now seems to exist, play an important role in helping to "negotiate the system" on behalf of the prospective employee.

Supervisors and managers often do not deal with personnel departments when recruiting and hiring professionals. But personnel departments are becoming the Affirmative Action arms of companies. Companies may not realize the resource they have at hand to help resolve uncertainties in a decision to hire a visually impaired candidate. Personnel is most likely to know of precedents in similar employment within the organization and elsewhere in industry. While the supervisor can best judge the technical qualifications of the professional, uncertainties regarding basic adaptations may be answered by information about previous visually impaired employees. The expertise of the employment manager and staff is sometimes underused.

Special Handicapped Units

The Personnel Unit with a staff member designated for "handicapped employment" is becoming common. The designation of specific staff members is not viewed with unqualified approval by disabled persons. Some, in fact, strongly disapprove. There are conceptual and sometimes operational problems with this arrangement. Appointing a coordinator for the placement of disabled persons makes several assumptions:

1. That disabled persons want or need special treatment, which can't be handled informally.
2. That the coordinator has the requisite knowledge or attitude to make a difference for the employer or the company. Perhaps a company would do better to maintain a quality personnel and affirmative action unit and to seek outside management consultation if required. Voluntary and state government agencies are available as needed for such consultation.

We would all like to avoid situations where the best motivated personnel unit or affirmative action officer acts to facilitate employment by advising the employing unit of an applicant's impairment. The receipt of such advance information might assume that the visual impairment is directly related to or would interfere with the performance of all work when this simply is not the case.

Recommendations: Hiring

1. The employer's (or manager's) approach must begin with the *continuous* publicizing of the organization's commitment to hiring persons with disabilities.
2. Through repeated management level expression of this commitment, reluctance to refer qualified, disabled persons without reference to the handicapping condition will be overcome.
3. Employers involved in recruitment and hiring must understand management's committment to erase disability as a hiring factor. The enunciation of management's commitment to hire disabled persons needs constant communication and reinforcement. Many concerns use communication techniques such as films, video-tapes, houseorgans, posters throughout plants, offices and common areas where there is a great deal of traffic. One company president sent a statement about the firm's hire-the-handicapped program to first-line and unit supervisors, who had to sign off their receipt of the document. In other companies and in the federal government, supervisors' performance standards include evidence of affirmative action as a critical element in annual performance appraisals.

Checking Personal References

Even when an applicant comes to you through informal channels, you follow routine practice and contact references. The approach to follow in checking the visually impaired candidate's references is similar to the one used in the interview. The dominant focus should be on the job relevant abilities or technical deficiencies that the candidate has demonstrated. References with technical expertise can evaluate the candidate's strengths and weaknesses in relevant occupational skills but are unlikely to have comparable expertise in visual impairment and how it might affect *future* work situations. For information on the visual impairment, rely on direct discussion with the applicant.

The Medical Examiner

You can require a disabled applicant to have a medical examination only if you have the same requirement for nondisabled persons. Physicians should advise about physical condition *only*.

Selection decisions are the prerogative of management. Some physicians tend to make assessments without reference to the particulars of "the job" as it exists or is modified when the person is hired. Further, few physicians have awareness about job tasks and their modifications.

The lines of decision-making between physicians and management are being renegotiated as a result of recognition that the supervisor's knowledge of the job *is* needed before medical decisions can be made. The physician's role is changing from being an exclusionary to an inclusionary one.

The increasing communication between physicians and management has led to concern about confidentiality of medical information. Although confidentiality is not a major issue for most visually impaired persons (due to visibility of the disability), means must be found to provide adequate protection for confidentiality without leaving decisions over hiring to medical judgment alone. Hiring is a management decision, not a medical one. Medical judgments should constitute recommendations, not *de facto* decisions.

In fact, a medical practitioner with his or her focus on disease or the absence of health, may not be the most appropriate authority for making decisions about developing accommodations in the work environment. In some companies, company engineering staff and rehabilitation specialists from state or community agencies have helped. The rehabilitation specialists need not have been the source of recruiting the applicant, nor the engineers directly related to the applicant's field. The role of all is to identify strengths, not to evaluate weaknesses.

The visually impaired applicant is in the best position to help resolve uncertainties about the lack of vision that arise during the interview.

How Do Visually Impaired Persons Read

All people who have professional, managerial or technical jobs don't have the same needs for business-related literature but, to some extent, they all, blind and visually impaired persons included, must read.

Contrary to popular opinion, braille is not the primary reading medium for most blind and visually impaired persons. Because the production of braille is a slow, expensive and complex process, blind persons cannot rely on it when performance of their jobs demands up-to-the minute information. Further, fluent readers of braille tend to be a minority: totally blind persons who never had vision or lost it in childhood. Braille, however, is an excellent medium for note-taking.

Most totally blind persons and many of those with low vision rely heavily on a combination of tape recordings and volunteer readers to gain access to work-related information. A secretary, clerk, spouse, friend or volunteer might spend several hours a week reading to the blind staff member at the office, plant or at home depending on the nature and importance of the material. If company policy permits the reader can tape record the material which allows the blind staff member to read whenever it is convenient. In general, blind persons will make their own reading arrangements with readers.

Often, the volunteer reader is a complete stranger to the blind person. Many blind people rely heavily on Recording for the Blind, a national voluntary organization which records educational and professional literature for all disabled persons who cannot read conventional print.

In addition, blind and visually impaired persons use a variety of national and local resources for access to general information. The Library of Congress provides general fiction and non fiction and a wide variety of magazines including news weeklies on records, cassettes and in braille free of charge through a nationwide network of regional libraries to persons who cannot read conventional print. A number of commercial publishers issue large print editions of general books and magazines. And, in many communities across the country, blind and visually impaired persons can "read" their daily newspapers by listening to Radio Information Services on local open channel or closed channel FM radio stations.

Many persons with low vision read regular size print with the help of a variety of aids. For instance, special lenses in eyeglasses, or a hand-held magnifier prescribed by an ophthalmologist or optometrist in a low vision clinic, or a TV-like device which magnifies print and controls luminescence and contrast. Some persons with low vision use a combination of these methods.

Recent advances in technology have led to the development of a variety of sophisticated reading machines that enable blind persons to "read" conventional print. One reading machine scans the printed material and produces a tactile representation through the electronically activated points which the blind person "reads" with his or her fingers. Another machine scans the printed material and reproduces it through synthetic speech. While this equipment is expensive, such machines can be shared by several persons within a company. For example, the U.S. Department of Justice has a centrally located sensory aids resource center for its blind and visually impaired attorneys.

ON THE JOB

Most decisions about job assignments are part of the basic employment interview, since an applicant usually is being interviewed about a specific position.

Sometimes though, interviews are exploratory, used to determine whether a position can be found for a given candidate. When this interview technique is used with a disabled person it might be discriminatory—but not necessarily.

Occasionally, companies do interview non-disabled individuals for possible employment without a particular job in mind. While we understand the usefulness of this approach, it requires careful scrutiny.

This approach is often used to recruit entry-level engineers and computer scientists on campus. When visually impaired persons are recruited as part of such a general practice, job assignment considerations discussed in this section do not apply (although task assignment may).

Special Treatment

Special treatment of visually impaired persons through hiring without job assignment occurs in several ways. One route, common at entry level, grows out of the job placement activities of rehabilitation specialists and other professionals from state government and community rehabilitation and related agencies.

The designation of a personnel specialist to carry out affirmative action plans can also lead to hiring a visually impaired person before a job assignment has been identified.

This method of hiring disabled persons can lead to stereotyped job assignments. There are even cases where managers have hired a visually impaired person without job assignment and had no idea how to "use" them. One blind engineer, hired by an R & D unit, had four years of product testing experience, but his supervisors had no idea what he could do. His first assignment was to attend meetings, talk to staff, and through that create a role for himself. When his ability to write became apparent, his job as technical writer was created. Although this position requires engineering knowledge, it does not fully draw upon this person's education and experience. Consequently, he is underemployed, despite the company's positive Affirmative Action intent.

There is a middle ground. After identifying qualified visually impaired persons, they can be held in a pending file until openings that match their skills occur.

Assignment Problems with a New Hire

Beginning a job is challenging and difficult: the newcomer must learn the structure of the company, how work roles fit together, and who the persons are who fill these roles. To expect that the newcomer will also create his or her own job places a burden on anyone and a heavier one on a visually impaired person who may need time to become accepted. Except at very high levels, where a less defined work context and responsibilities benefit the person *and* the organization, blind persons should be hired to fill more structured jobs until his assimilation is assured.

The job assignment issue also arises when job retention for an employee who loses his vision while working is discussed. If a company's goal is to permit the worker to retain the same job, there is no problem. The earlier the visual problem is identified and treated, the better the company and the visually impaired employee are able to deal with retaining the same job.

When the commitment is to retain the employee, but not necessarily in the same job, problems occur. Faced with an engineer who was losing his vision, an R & D unit of a large electronics corporation did not know what to do. After a difficult period for both the employee and management, which included seeking information about rehabilitation resources and considering options, the employee eventually received training in computer programming, which was not related to previous work, required less skill and was of lower status. (See Section 5: Retaining A Productive Employee.)

Subsequently, the same organization has hired two legally blind persons (one with low vision) and assigned both to computer programming, even though their backgrounds and training were dissimilar (one was an electrical engineer, the other a programmer). However, in the same company (we're happy to report) plans for another employee, who was losing his vision, center around having him retrained to do the kind of work he'd done before.

Stereotyping

Having found computer programming "appropriate" employment for the blind, this company has come to rely on this solution for every college-educated person, regardless of skills and experience. This practice has created an *occupational ghetto*, but apparently is not viewed by

management as stereotyping. In fact, the placement of two of these blind persons in the same office was attributed to "coincidence." An electrical engineer overcame this by assertive efforts to gain a position consistent with his advanced training and abilities. As a result of his persistence, he currently functions as an electrical engineer. Obviously, the company ultimately agreed that he was indeed qualified for the high-level position, which he assumed.

What we have just described represents stereotyping. The company had "heart" but continually fell back on the same job assignment as a "solution" for visually impaired persons. We have noted other instances where this reliance on "what has worked" affected the nature of tasks assigned.

Don't dump company history down the drain. But don't be enslaved by "what has worked" and thus restrict the person's job mobility.

We have frequently found visually impaired persons who had developed job roles, some kind of staff or consultative assignment, which removed them from the main work in the organization. Once the visually impaired person had established a work role, there was little inclination to alter it by assigning new tasks or promotion to a higher position.

Unfortunately, the problem seems to be that supervisors understate or constrict the range of tasks that they envisage visually impaired employees undertaking. In assigning workers to jobs and to tasks, the main point is to avoid those things which are "comfortable." These tendencies can be overcome, as many companies have, by using a flexible approach which matches an individual to an appropriate position, and then provides opportunity for growth within it. This applies to able sighted persons as well as to able persons who are visually impaired.

Accommodations and Adaptations

Whenever any individual begins a job, some adaptations and accommodations, ranging from the subtle, even imperceptible, to substantial, are made in the mix of tasks, equipment and work relationships which that person uses to get a job done.

Some sighted executives want typewriters to do creative work. Others want desktop calculators,

Existing accommodations should not constitute a set of fetters for the disabled employee's opportunities for new assignments.

with both tape and visual outputs. Accommodations are not unique to visually impaired individuals. As a matter of fact, the types of adaptations needed to accomplish tasks with partial sight are likely to be in the repertoire of the company, or, of the over-all parent corporation.

In this sectlon we cannot go into the kind of detail about adaptation that would cover all situations. After all, we are talking about personnel whose expertise is highly specialized, and for whom work requirements will be diverse.

The nature of visual disability varies from person to person. Some are able to read ordinary print, but only for brief periods, or under special lighting; others are able to see well enough in the center of their visual field, but have no peripheral vision, or vice versa; In some people, the usable vision fluctuates withln a day, or over a period of time. Reading, however, is important—even if handled in non-traditional ways.

Finally, individuals with the same type and degree of vision impairment, including the totally blind, differ in how much and in what activities their visual loss is actually a handicap. This variation reflects the techniques they have learned, or figured out for themselves, to accomplish tasks by alternate means, as well as their particular pattern of abilities and personal characteristics including general intelligence, physical stamina, and memory.

At the interview, once qualifications are established, begin discussing with the visually impaired applicant what adaptations would permit his or her particular talents to be used in the position that is open. But remember that full discussion of accommodations on a "once and for all" basis is unrealistic. Actual experience and changing circumstances, once one is on the job, inevitably affect the accommodations required. A need for adaptations that were not anticipated may become apparent, while some that were anticipated may turn out to be necessary only for a short period, or unnecessary.

Everyone Needs Work "Accommodations"

Changing needs for accommodations on the job apply to non-disabled employees as well. They are typically managed routinely through discussions initiated by the employee or the supervisor.

Don't dump company history down the drain. But don't be enslaved by what has worked and thus restrict the person's job mobility.

Employers often seem to treat *any* special arrangements made for an employee who is blind or visually impaired as extraordinary. To minimize potential stress, it is best that employee *and* employer understand that the need for accommodations applies to many persons, disabled or not disabled, and may change at any time. Ideally, both would feel comfortable discussing new needs as they arise. Some of our contacts with professional, managerial and technical personnel suggest that persons hired as disabled often feel a heightened sensitivity about being on "trial," and therefore, do not make known the need for reasonable accommodations.

This reluctance can be self-defeating, because work may suffer. Unfortunately, though, in some cases reluctance to "rock the boat" is realistic. Some hiring decisions for disabled persons are explicitly labeled "temporary" or "provisional." Unless the employer makes it clear that the provisional status allows for consideration of accommodations after starting employment, the employee may, rightly or wrongly, feel at considerable risk in raising the question.

On the other hand, we know that employers are in fact quite ready to provide needed accommodations that arise after employment begins. In some situations, indeed, the employer has provided even more substantial accommodations than the employee requested. One professional found he was having difficulty reading and requested an additional desklamp; he was given the lamp and additional ceiling lights as well.

In another situation, co-workers complained that a computer scientist's braille terminal was very noisy; the employer chose to solve this problem by providing a private area which was also more conducive for concentrated work. Wherever such adaptations involve money, we can speculate that the employer's reaction reflects positively on the visually impaired person's contribution. And, in some instances, adaptations, such as increased lighting, help all employees.

Who Pays for Accommodations?

Who pays for accommodations? A basic question to most employers. The possible answers are more varied than simply: "the employer provides" them, or "the applicant provides" them, or even "the employer provides some things while the applicant provides others." Another possibility, and perhaps the most frequent, is that the employer and the applicant share the financial responsibility. In some instances, state government agencies, voluntary social agencies or service groups may help to finance adaptations. In addition, tax incentive programs are available to companies when a blind or severely visually impaired person is hired.

What are Accommodations?

The broadest definition of an adaptive arrangement includes not only special devices, and adaptations through existing devices, but also special personnel (for blind persons, the only need would be for readers); special functions for existing personnel (again, as readers); different ways of carrying out some tasks (for example, using touch rather than vision); or different ways of allocating tasks and team efforts.

A broad definition would also include the *ideas* involved, whenever innovative situations are called for, as is frequent since visually impaired persons are entering many highly specialized fields (scientific jobs) for the first time. Finally, new managerial attitudes and skills are often called for when new techniques and devices are brought into a job setting. In most situational adaptations both the employer and the applicant make a time or monetary contribution. The usual criteria for the restricted definition is that the accommodation has an identifiable dollar cost. The question is, who pays? The answer is varied —and negotiable. Cost is not the only factor in whether certain accommodations will be acceptable to either. The employer may have a general community relations or public relations point of view to uphold. The employee may find that a particular adaptation makes him less anonymous than he wishes to be.

Reading: A Key Function

For visually impaired or blind persons in professional jobs, the main need where a question of cost arises is reading. While the amount of on-the-job reading varies among fields, it is a requirement for all. Add off-the-job professional reading and the gap among fields narrows. Information the American Foundation for the Blind has gathered over the years reveals that virtually all visually impaired professional and managerial personnel incur out-of-pocket costs for reading associated with their jobs. The rare exception is someone with an employer—provided secretary or reader for all on-the-job reading and a spouse, relative, friend, or other volunteer for outside professional reading.

Outstanding technological breakthroughs have made reading machines which scan the printed page and produce synthesized speech or tactile output available. Though these hi-tech machines are not a universal requirement, they are useful to some persons, in some settings, for some

jobs. For many persons they truly "narrow the gap" in a very meaningful way.

Resources for Adaptations

Developing "resource-connections" for adaptations is encouraged. State and community agencies often make good resource connections. At one R & D site, two blind persons in engineering were developing computer adaptations with braille output but had never communicated about what they were doing, although each knew of the other's existence.

Affirmative action personnel in a R & D unit in one company felt they had all the resources they needed from the expertise of their own staff scientists and engineers to develop devices needed by disabled staff members. Some companies do not want publicity. The self-reliant attitude of management resulted in part from their desire to keep their efforts for the disabled from the public eye.

To plan for accommodations, it is important to start during the hiring process to discuss the visual disability in relation to the job. The applicant should know what adaptations would be made, to be able to make a decision about accepting the position and to allow adequate planning before beginning work.

While the visually impaired person should be prepared to assume major responsibility for accommodations, the employer will want to take a more active role in some cases.

The development of accommodations continues throughout the disabled person's career within the organization. As new technologies become available, and as the employee takes on new tasks, it is necessry to separate issues of:

1. Visually impaired person's own adaptations.
2. Adaptive work methods.
3. New equipment.

We must reassess the adequacy of existing accommodations. Existing accommodations should not constitute a set of fetters for the disabled employee's opportunities for new assignments and promotions.

In some instances, adaptations, such as increased lighting, help all employees.

RETAINING A PRODUCTIVE EMPLOYEE

What about the employee who loses his or her vision after employment?

Retaining a productive professional, managerial or technical employee cannot be separated from the company's total employee relations program. Job retention is part of the continuum which started with recruitment and ends with the employee's retirement on pension at the appropriate age. Job retention of a visually impaired employee may also be likened to internal recruiting. This approach may produce very cost-effective recruiting and assignment of unfilled slots.

A program for job retention and advancement of visually impaired persons should be fully integrated into the corporation's total personnel management policy and not be considered a special program. Management methods in job retention require the same kind of human resources skills found in other areas.

Retention of employees in exempt and non-exempt positions will vary from company to company. Large decentralized corporations can set an unequivocal support program regarding the retention of employees who become visually impaired.

If labor unions are involved, early consultation is advised to protect sensibilities when job modifications, adaptation, or restructuring come to the fore (we urge using the least volatile term!). Some companies have a full-fledged rehabilitation program. In others, liaison to the state and local rehabilitaiton and social welfare systems are already in place.

Help is at hand. Here are just a few examples of services which can be tapped by companies involved in job retention activities:

1. Experts on low vision devices for the partially sighted.
2. Engineering consultants on sensory aids.
3. Consultants on "travel training" (orientation and mobility).
4. Counselors trained in job analysis for positions which can be performed by visually impaired persons.
5. Organizations to tape or cassette record (with company permission only) job-related materials and literature.
6. Trainers for awareness and sensitivity programs geared to managers and supervisors.

We stress that where we suggest action to the employer, we do so knowing that technical assistance on job retention programs is available at little or no cost. For example—at the company level, the employer should:

1. Evaluate and make an effort to restructure the employee's job, when necessary, in order to accomplish job retention.
2. Survey other jobs in the company, if necessary, to retain the visually impaired employee.
3. Use "outside" rehabilitation services such as psychological testing and counseling, medical evaluation and restoration, job training and any other services which may be available.
4. Re-assign a blind employee to a suitable job ideally at the same level as his previous job, unless the employee qualifies for a higher level position.
5. State in writing and widely disseminate throughout the company your policy that visually impaired and other disabled employees retain the right to their own jobs, or to other jobs commensurate with their training and ability.
6. State in writing that visual impairment is not cause for denial of employment in positions which do not require vision, i.e., where work tasks can be handled nonvisually or with low vision aids.
7. Educate management and line supervisory staff about this policy in depth, so that they understand and accept wholly the principles involved and support the policy at every level within the organization. Recognize that this approach requires continuing reinforcement.
8. Include visual evaluation as part of physical

examinations when such examinations are required.

9. Assign a company unit and an individual within that unit (personnel—human resources—employee relations) to establish a liaison with state or local community agencies providing services for visually impaired persons. (State and local community agencies serving other disability populations should also be known to the company.)

On the corporate level managers should:

1. Set up an information system, regarding company policy and the employee's right of retention under this policy. This job retention policy should be integrated with other employee relations programs.
2. Support the idea of an individualized written plan of action for returning the visually impaired person to employment. This individualized written plan should be agreed to and signed by all persons concerned, including the employee, the line supervisor, and the manager.
3. Recognize that early identification of visual impairment or other progressive disabilities can ultimately save the employee income and the company disability benefits.
4. Stress the savings in productivity of an individual in whom the company already has an investment.

While it is beyond the scope of this Guide to detail all of the elements of the implementation of a job retention program, we want to emphasize three concluding points:

1. The range of disabilities is so wide with so many variations and levels of intensity that the planning of a job retention program on the corporate or company level requires the manpower to set up very highly individualized activities.
2. The individualized program may be much more simple than initially anticipated. Employers will find that some employees with visual impairment require little assistance; in fact, they may be able to identify for themselves an appropriate job accommodation, or another suitable position which hitherto had not been recognized as feasible.
3. Where the onset of blindness is rapid and total, the ability of the company to relate effectively to rehabilitation agencies is essential. Preplanning is, of course, advisable.

Technical assistance on job retention programs is available at little or no cost.

THE AFB

The American Foundation for the Blind is a private, nonprofit agency established in 1921 to carry on research, to collect and disseminate information, and to advise and give counsel on matters that improve and strengthen services to blind persons. AFB receives financial support from individuals, foundations, corporations and governmental agencies.

During the first two decades of this century, leading figures in work for the blind realized that the problems confronting blind persons could not be solved until blindness was made a truly national concern. A proposal to establish a publicly supported agency to better the lives of blind persons through indirect (i.e., "back-up") services was presented at meetings of organizations concerned with helping and teaching the blind, and in 1921 AFB was incorporated.

The staff of the AFB, in cooperation with others in the field, provides a wide variety of services for the blind person himself, for the general public, for the professional in service organizations and schools and to business and industry.

AFB REGIONAL OFFICES

REGION I (New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, Rhode Island)

Regional Consultant
American Foundation for the Blind
15 West 16th Street
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REGION II (Ohio, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, West Virginia, Maryland, Virginia, Delaware, District of Columbia)

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American Foundation for the Blind
15 West 16 Street
New York, New York 10011
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REGION III (Minnesota, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri, Illinois, Indiana)

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American Foundation for the Blind
500 North Michigan Avenue Room 2206
Chicago, Illinois 60611
(312) 321-1880

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100 Peachtree Street
Atlanta, Georgia 30303
(404) 525-2303

REGION V (Colorado, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Oklahoma, Texas, Wyoming, New Mexico)
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American Foundation for the Blind
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Dallas, Texas 73240
(214) 630-8035

REGION VI (Alaska, Arizona, California, Guam, Hawaii, Idaho, Nevada, Utah, Washington, Oregon)
Regional Consultant
American Foundation for the Blind
760 Market Street
Room 348
San Francisco, California 94102
(415) 392-4845

AFB PUBLICATIONS OF INTEREST TO EMPLOYERS

Aids for the Eighties: What They Are and What They Do. By C. Michael Mellor. 1981. Single Copy free. 2-50 copies, 75 cents each; 51-100 copies, 70 cents each; 101-500 copies, 65 cents each. Order No. FTP103.

AFB Catalog of Publications. Issued regularly. Free. A complete guide to AFB information services.

AFB Consumer Products Catalog. Issued regularly. Free. Order No. FTL026.
A guide to aids and devices distributed by AFB. Large print and braille editions.

American Foundation for the Blind Directory of Agencies Serving the Visually Handicapped in the United States. 1981. $15.00. Order No. PIP080.
Comprehensive guide to local, state and national services for the blind and visually impaired. Includes names, addresses, telephone numbers and detailed descriptions of programs.

Environmental Modifications for the Visually Impaired: A Handbook. 1977. Single copy free. 2-50 copies, 35 cents each; 51-100 copies, 33 cents each; 101-500 copies, 30 cents each. Order No: FIP 055.
Suggestions for environmental modifications that meet the needs of visually impaired and comprehensive lists of further sources of information.

Facts About Blindness & Visual Impairment. 1981. Single copy free. 2-50 copies, 20 cents each; 51-100 copies, 18 cents each; 101-500 copies, 15 cents each. Order No. FIL031. Basic information about blindness and the names, addresses and telephone numbers of all state agencies for the blind.

Films About Blindness. Issued regularly. Free. Order No. FIL032. A guide to AFB audio-visual materials.

How Does A Blind Person Get Around. 1973. Single copy free. 2-50 copies, 35 cents each; 51-100 copies, 33 cents each. 101-500 copies, 30 cents each. Order No. FML034.
In non-technical language, describes methods blind and visually impaired persons use to travel. Illustrated.

Living With Impaired Vision: An Introduction. By Anne Yeadon and Dava Grayson. 1980. $7.00. Order No. PIP088.
An overview of how blind and visually impaired persons function. Written in non-technical language for a general audience. Illustrated.

Sensory Aids for Employment of Blind and Visually Impaired Persons: A Resource Guide. Compiled by Sensory Aids Foundation 1978. $7.50. Large Print Edition Order No. PTP083. Braille edition order No. PTP967.
Detailed information about 150 devices that visually impaired persons use to perform a wide variety of jobs. Discusses specific job applications. Photographs.

What Can We Do About Limited Vision. By Irving R. Dickman. 1980. Single copy free. Bulk orders from Public Affairs Committee. Discusses various eye problems that seriously limit vision and explains services and aids available.

SOURCES OF SENSORY AIDS

	Examples of Products
Apollo Lasers, Inc. 6357 Arizona Circle Los Angeles, California (90045) (213) 776-3343	Closed circuit television (CCTV) reading system that greatly enlarges print, allowing partially sighted persons to read it.
IBM Office Products Div. 400 Parsons's Pond Drive Franklin Lakes, NJ 07417 (201) 848-1900	Audio Typing Unit. Uses synthetic speech to tell the typist what letter or words have just been typed; speech facility allows typists to proofread their own typing and to make corrections.
Kurzweil Computer Products, Inc. 68 Rogers Street Cambridge, MA 02142 (617) 864-4700	Kurzweil Reading Machine: Converts printed word into full-word synthetic speech.
Maryland Computer Services 101 Thomas Street at Bond Bel Air, MD 21014 (301) 838-8888	Full speech computer terminals that use synthetic speech to give blind persons access to computer systems.
Pelco Sales, Inc. 351 East Alondra Blvd. Gardena, CA 90248 (213) 323-1628	Closed circuit television (CCTV) reading system that greatly enlarges print, allowing partially sighted persons to read it.
Science for the Blind Products Box 385 Wayne, PA 19087 (215) 664-9429	Scientific and technical instruments; tools; braille calculator; speech compressor.
Telesensory Systems, Inc. 3408 Hillview Avenue Palo Alto, Ca 94304 (415) 493-2626	Optacon reading device that translates print into a vibrating image the reader can feel and identify; VersaBraille paperless brailler system; Talking Calculator.
Triformation Systems, Inc. 3132 S.E. Jay Street Stuart, FL 33494 (305) 283-4817	Braille terminals that emboss computer output in braille; talking interactive computer terminal; Digicassette portable braille recorder.
Visualtek 1610 26th Street Santa Monica, CS 90404 (213) 829-6841	Closed circuit television (CCTV) reading system that greatly enlarges print, allowing partially sighted persons to read it.

Other products are listed in these AFB publications: *Products for People with Vision Problems* (free) and *Sensory Aids for Employment of Blind and Visually Impaired Persons: A Resource Guide* ($7.50).

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